

Improvise, Adapt, Overcome: small unit training

I deployed twice to Iraq with a Multiple-Launch Rocket System firing platoon with the 6th Battalion, 27th Field Artillery. In the Army we often hear, it's an NCO's role to ensure junior Soldiers can carry on with the mission in the absence of a leader.

It's because of this, as NCOs we have to go beyond making sure our Soldiers are tactically and technically proficient. We must not only bring all our experience to the table, but our essence as leaders. We must also integrate lessons learned from previous deployments into our current training scenarios. Because, when it comes right down to it and when you least expect it, fate can step in and take you out of the fight. So, are your Soldiers ready and able to complete the mission without you?

Deployed with the U.S. Marine Corps. My second deployment took me to Tikrit. It was there my unit conducted convoy security missions. My junior leaders already had first-hand experience with the mission given to us because of our prior deployment, and it showed. But, three months into our deployment, my platoon was tasked to move to Forward Operating Base Fallujah, where we supported a U.S. Marine Corps logistics transportation unit.

Our mission took us to a variety of different areas, such as Ramadi, Camp Smitty, al Asad and Baghdad. We enjoyed our time with the Marines. They are pure go-getters, always looking for the next fight.

Challenges. While stationed in Fallujah, we had to become very resourceful. We were under control of a joint Army-Marine command center. As a result we really didn't have any higher U.S. Army unit we could depend on for support.

The Marine Corps transportation company did what they could for us as far as Class III and Class IX products. The joint command center sent us to various places on Forward Operating Base Fallujah for support of other supply classes. But often, we had to make do with what we had.

This also forced my Soldiers to become creative thinkers to accomplish the mission with little or no back up resources. Because we were the only Soldiers there and had no other Army unit to turn to when the going got tough, we became a tight-knitted group. We definitely gained a new perspective on making our equipment and supplies go the distance.

But no matter what we were doing, I had to make sure I took care of my troops. Because of the lack of direct Army support in a forward deployed area, often the platoon felt like the red-headed step children of the U.S. Marine Corps. Every day, I reassured them we were sent there because the platoon was competent enough to operate on our own.

Being a platoon sergeant of an artillery platoon, I usually didn't need to "hand carry" my Soldiers through a mission. As long as I gave them the mission and the tools they needed, they could accomplish it. It was a different case in Fallujah.

It was important my troops knew I was willing to get my hands dirty right along with them. They had to know I would not give them any task I wouldn't do myself. It was also important to the mission to stay involved.

We developed a genuine cohesion within the platoon that is seen among most units in the Army. But for us, cohesion grew tenfold because of the circumstances we found ourselves in. Basically, we were just a handful of U.S. Army Soldiers in the midst of a sea of U.S. Marines. Everything we did was different from the Marines,

from the way we talked, ate and slept to the way we conducted our missions. For some of my Soldiers, it was truly an isolating experience. But in the end, the unit turned a possible negative into a positive and became very self-sufficient.

Training. Successful training creates a successful deployment. Before deploying, our unit participated in very strenuous and realistic training. This was our first step into becoming a tight, cohesive unit. We trained on everything from convoy procedures to live-fire exercises. We practiced security during movement and the procedures for responding to small arms or an improvised explosive device attack. Nothing was left untrained, and we prepared for every possible scenario.

It was during this time, we emphasized the task of taking the fight to the enemy and that — no matter what happened — no one was to be left behind. As we laid the groundwork of unit cohesion during our training, none of us really knew how vitally important it would be to us during future operations.

This was just the start. When the platoon had some down time, we continually talked about what we would do if certain situations were to arise and what our expectations were. This became important in March 2006. After completing long three months in Fallujah, we were ordered back to Tikrit.

The payoff. My unit sent three additional vehicles to support our convoy on the trip north. We made three attempts to leave the forward operating base. Each time, the routes were closed due to improvised explosive device attacks. After the third day, we were given clearance to leave.

The previous attacks on our route didn't really deter the mindset of the platoon. We had been in similar attacks, thankfully with no injuries. I was in the third vehicle. As we proceeded on our route, my vehicle was hit with an improvised explosive device. My vehicle was engulfed in flames, and my driver and I were seriously injured. Luckily, we immediately were ejected from the vehicle by the blast.

Most of what occurred after that is distant and hazy. I remember putting out the flames which covered most of my body. Once I regained composure, I looked for my driver to determine his status. While I searched, I noticed that my platoon was conducting their security steps just as we had practiced numerous times before. All their training had paid off as this was their immediate reaction to the situation.

The only confusion was my own. Dazed, bloodied and extremely angered, I assessed the area with my platoon leader to coordinate a casualty evacuation.

I was very proud of my troops that day. They lived up to the Army Values. The platoon continued to secure the area as my driver and I were evacuated. Although a great team was broken up that day, I had no doubt that they would operate just as they had done before under the guidance of any NCO.

The NCO Corps is a vital clock piece that keeps everything ticking. It is the NCO's role to ensure their Soldiers can carry on without them, and by doing so become leaders themselves. This is the true measure of being an NCO. Are you up for it? ■

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